Drawing from Life

*Sketches of everyday moments*

Don Thomas, November 2020
Airplane Nap

I sketched this guy very early in the morning on our overnight flight to London. The cabin lights were low with a steady hum of the engines. I couldn’t sleep. Sketching in the dark is sometimes fun because it can feel very private and it’s easier to relax and just focus. I finished the drawing, closed the sketchbook and slept soundly until the lights came back on.
I love to draw people at airports. This couple were ‘watchers’. They picked a spot against a wall in bulky overcoats and just watched everyone. If I could have captured their slow eye movements, I would have. I remembered seeing animals in the zoo sitting motionless and watching the crowds, too. Maybe they know something we don’t.
The Sunken Garden at Conservatory in Como Park always has beautiful flowers on display. This lady was absolutely fascinated with this strange flower. I loved the way she was crouching low to get closer to get her iPhone closer. I think she was talking to the flower...I guess it could have been someone on the phone, too.
Dancing in the Park

It was a warm summer night in Mears Park. This beautiful little girl was feeling the music and clearly in her own world as she gently moved to the music.

When I was a kid, I wanted to be an animator for Walt Disney. Capturing movement seemed magical. I wrote Walt a letter asking him what I should do...he wrote back and said, ‘just keep drawing everything.’ Good advice, Walt.
Drinking Alone

Drawing people in a bar can sometimes be a little sad. I often witness people who look very alone in a crowd. That kind of public isolation confuses me. Are they reaching out for help? Does being in a crowd give comfort? Or did they just stop in for drink?

I am very careful to respect their privacy and dignity.
I wish I could remember the name of this performer... she was fantastic! She was a wonderful singer and danced all over the stage.

She was singing to us and singing with her band, but she was also singing to herself while swinging her microphone cord around like an animated lasso. It's hard to capture that kind of energy, but fun to try!
Eating an Apple

People should video tape themselves eating. I bet they’d be surprised. This lady was eating a large apple with an angry vengeance. Spittle and bits of apple were dropping into her lap. I’m not sure she was even enjoying the taste and freshness. I probably shouldn’t watch her eat, let alone sketch her, but I couldn’t look away. Poor apple didn’t deserve an end like that.
Hacky Sack Grand Old Days

Grand Old Days attracts thousands of people down Grand Avenue in St. Paul on a Sunday. It is a swarming promenade of people gathered to celebrate the beginning of the summer. These three teenage boys stopped in the middle of the street and did an amazing game of Hacky Sack in front of me. They talked the whole time they played. Fun.
We stopped at a coffee shop in Italy. It got very dark, then started to rain hard. Umbrellas popped out quickly. I noticed this lady in a green raincoat with what I assumed to have cerebral palsy. The rain didn’t seem to bother her in the least. She just kept splashing through the puddles with a faint smile.

I stopped complaining about my sore feet.
Sometimes, it’s just how a person is sitting that catches my attention. On a hot summer afternoon, I noticed this lady with her head bent down, legs-tucked-in, bare feet scrunching warm sand, elbows-in and hunched-up shoulders while holding a book open with one hand on a flapping towel. She couldn’t get any smaller.

Must have been a very good book.
I imagined the men were brothers who still lived in the same small town and this was the end of their first big trip. They were all high school sweethearts except the lady at the far end, but they all got along anyway.

Who knows...it could be true?
A beautiful jazz performer who threw her whole body into the song. I thought about sketching all the different ways she used her hands, but settled on this wide-open gesture. Sketching performers is really fun, because you need to be fast. This was about a 5 minute sketch.

You try not to think too much...just enjoy the music and draw.
Laid Back Concert

Drawing this couple from behind was fun, because it was all about the seating. Their folding chairs were like something comfortable they’d been wearing forever, like an old sweatshirt and khaki pants. The chairs creaked and groaned as they settled in to hear the music.

I never saw their faces.
I sketched this couple because I loved the interplay of her smoke and their posture. She would whisper in his ear once in a while and he’d turn his head half-way and smile. I love that.

Now, if she could only stop smoking...
I love sketching people in conversation. Interpreting body language is fun. They could have both been hard of hearing, but I prefer to think the reason they were leaning into each other was to catch up on important personal events or to understand a fantastic idea or maybe even confide in a secret. Who knows? Either way, I found them fun to draw.
This guy started dancing by himself in front of the outdoor stage. I thought he was drunk at first and then he had these elegant and graceful moves. He had a full backpack on under his big coat, which made him look a little Quasi Modo-like. It was amazing. His eyes seemed closed. He was oblivious to the crowd behind him, except the little girl who high-stepped past him with a big smile!

Mears Park Movement
Mears Park Smoking

This lady seemed like she just came from work because she was dressed so nicely. She seemed exhausted from a long week. Everything about her showed fatigue; her posture, clothes, bag, hair.

But there was still a strong sense of something...resilience, confidence maybe.
On a flight back from Tucson, this mom settled her crying baby by standing in the aisle and rocking the child in a baby carrier. I noticed she had earbuds in. Her ‘rocking’ became more like dancing, so I wondered if she didn’t have some fun tunes playing.

I loved the little feet hanging from each side and how the strap in the back became a ‘tail’. 

Mom and Baby @ 30,000 ft.
Neighborhood Cafe

This guy was a regular at the cafe. He is a house painter and always wore a flannel shirt over his work clothes. Whenever I saw him, he ordered a big cup of coffee and the same breakfast. I sketched him many times. I bet he was a good painter.

The Neighborhood Cafe is still closed.
These two guys fascinated me. They both had POW patches on their worn-out jackets. I can’t even imagine what that was like. They ate slowly and quietly. The waitress did not rush them. I’m not even sure they looked at each other, but talked facing forward.

It was an honor to sketch them.

Old Friends-POW’s at Lunch
Ray Covington-Rice Park Concert

Ray was a fantastic entertainer. He sang and danced like Michael Jackson. As a big man, he commanded the stage. I tried to sketch his gestural movements and loved how the mic cord flew through the air.
Apparently, conducting interviews to look for wait-staff at a restaurant table is pretty normal. Seems strange to me. The guy must have been the manager, because he never moved from his stool. He looked like a very serious person. I liked this lady, because she leaned into the discussion, got into his space and made him sit back. It was a subtle move.

Good for her.
Sonoma Couple

It was early in the morning at a beautiful little garden square. This couple seemed very tender. I think she was figuring out something on her iPad. I loved their closeness and how their legs were mirrored. I bet they were good dancers.
The clarinet became part of her body as she played. Amazing energy and talent. I wished she didn’t have as much hair...I couldn’t see her face very well, but it didn’t really matter.

Musicians are fun to draw.
An accordion at a jazz festival? This guy made it cool. Pretty sure this group didn’t speak much English, but he had awesome hair and could really play.
These two guys were wearing the strangest fake fur vests I’d ever seen. I tried to get the watercolor splashes to match their energy...they were explosive and fun.

I’ve tried drawing the backgrounds of performers but found it was just too much information and the drawing would lose focus.
St. Paul Farmer’s Market

The Farmer’s Market is a really fun place to sketch. Everyone is pretty focused, so they don’t pay much attention to me. This lady clearly had a successful shopping morning.

This was another quick sketch as she walked away. I loved the sense of balance and weight as she carried a heavy load.
People are funny sometimes. It seems this guy needed to shut up, while his girlfriend looked something up on her iPhone. Maybe he was a constant talker. Maybe he was too loud. Who knows...
At least he took off the scarf to eat his sandwich.

The Strange Conversation
The Talk-Early AM

I sketched this couple from across the street. I could see there was some, ‘here’s how you screwed up again’ conversation going on. Best to keep my distance. Couples sitting on benches are always interesting to me.

So much can happen in that little space.
These are a series of very quick sketches done at lunch. The original images are very small, so it was easy to jot something down quickly and splash on some color later. I don’t usually use a pen for my sketches, but it can be quicker than pencil and I needed the practice.
Standing in line is one of my least favorite things to do. Seems like I’m not the only one. The best part of this line was the little boy, who eventually fell asleep waiting for the line to move.

I’ve felt like that.